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Topsy-Turvey: How the Civil War Turned the World Upside Down for Southern Children

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Review

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Jabour, Anya *Topsy-Turvey: How the Civil War Turned the World Upside Down for Southern Children*. Ivan R. Dee, \$28.95 ISBN 978-1-56663-632-2

Understanding How the War Affected Southern Children

The old adage that children should be seen and not heard has, in the past, also applied to the practice of history. Although now a vibrant and expanding field, historians of childhood have only really begun in-depth explorations of the unique experiences and outlooks of these historical actors in the last few decades. Over that same period, scholarly interpretations of the Civil War have also been expanding to include the myriad experiences of the homefront alongside the battlefield, offering a growing understanding of how ideas about identity – race, gender and class – shaped war-time experiences. Anya Jabour's excellent book, *Topsy-Turvy: How the Civil War Turned the World Upside Down for Southern Children*, sits at the nexus of these historiographical developments, providing new insights into the widespread trauma wrought on the smallest and most vulnerable members of society by one of the most pivotal moments in American history.

Jabour's previous work, including *Scarlett's Sisters*, has focused on coming of age and familial relations in the Old South. *Topsy-Turvy* builds on this foundation, beginning with a summary of the status quo antebellum period for children living in the South, emphasizing how "one's family literally defined one's identity" and demonstrating how southern children were socialized to adopt behaviors and attitudes suited to their status within the southern hierarchy (19). When war came southern children, both black and white, struggled to understand their new position in a world turned "topsy-turvy." Jabour notes that while all American children were affected by this monumental event, only southern children "truly lived in a war zone" (10). Thus these children experienced immense trauma as events they were unable to control, or even fully understand, disrupted their lives and family structures. Although in the past

historians may have dismissed children as being unable to take an active role in these political events, Jabour clearly demonstrates that even the youngest participants had a stake in the outcome. Her study traces how the war influenced virtually every aspect of southern childhood, from how they played and worked, to more extraordinary situations such military occupation or becoming a refugee. Perhaps most importantly, she shows that southern children, both black and white, possessed political views, much as adults did. These ideas developed during the secession crisis, extended through the war to Emancipation, and continued on to the memorialization of the war in the post-bellum period. The divergent experiences that the war created for free and enslaved southerners is a familiar story, given fresh clarity when told through the eyes of children.

The personal stories interwoven throughout the broader narrative are one of the greatest strengths of this book . While Jabour uses diverse sources to illustrate her analytical points, demonstrating the breadth of her research, she has also made an effort to include more extended personal narratives. These biographical details anchor the broad sweep of historical events in the experiences of an identifiable individual. For example, Benjamin Fleet of Virginia first appears in chapter 2 as a fourteen year old with strong Unionist sympathies. He then reappears throughout the text with details about his relationships with his siblings and his activities as a hunter and a trader in support of his family. Jabour also shows Fleet's developing confederate sympathies and records his untimely death only days after joining the army as a seventeen year old. Such recurring "characters" are particularly useful in reminding readers of the humanity of historical actors, and would make this book particularly engaging for students. It is also noteworthy that although she quite fairly laments the "uneven" availability of sources Jabour has made a valiant effort to balance the accounts of boys and girls, black and white, rich and poor. Such inclusiveness helps fulfill Jabour's stated aim of highlighting "both the distinctiveness of childhood and the diversity of children's lives" (12).

Jabour makes cogent use of gender, race, and class – as well as condition of servitude – to illuminate the differences in the childhood experiences of southerners. It is, however, somewhat surprising that she does not explicitly identify age itself as a category of analysis. While the role of age in shaping experience is implicit throughout the study, and Jabour does distinguish between various age groups from infants to young adults in her terminology, a more thorough discussion of the theoretical and methodological hurdles for historians studying childhood would have been useful, particularly as it relates to

interpreting sources. For example, elite white southern teenagers could keep journals recording their immediate reactions to events, but most information about childhood must come from memoirs or interviews recorded well after these moments of childhood have passed. How do the intervening years and experiences shape their perspectives? Jabour does frequently acknowledge in the text that former slaves interviewed in the Federal Writer's Project of the 1930s may have had altered viewpoints but, except in the chapter dealing specifically with memory, she less frequently makes a distinction between the diaries and memoirs of white southerners. More emphasis on sources such as parenting guides and sermons that laid out the ideal experiences of childhood may also have been useful, especially for establishing the distinct structures and ideals of antebellum childhood. While Jabour's focus is clearly on personal narratives, and discussions of social expectations around childhood may be found elsewhere, providing the idealized framework to anchor the personal narratives would be useful to readers new to this subject.

In her last chapter, Jabour addresses the memory of the Civil War constructed in the memoirs of these southern children. This is an area that could be expanded (and perhaps calls for a sequel). More might be said about how children became weapons in the immediate memorialization of the war. Marilyn Mayer Culpepper in *All Things Altered* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2002), quotes Hannah Rawlings' comment that if she had sons she would "inculcate from the time they could lisp: 'Fear God, love the South, and live to avenge her!'" Such sentiments suggested the widespread and systemic linkage between educating white children and the memory of the war that would linger for generations. Further, that it was the views and experiences of these children that would largely shape the subsequent memorialization of this war raises many new questions about the "Lost Cause" movement. One really wants to know much more about how the experiences of war stayed with these children as they came of age.

At the end of *Topsy-Turvy* the reader might contemplate whether this is a study of the Civil War told through the lens of children, or a study of childhood told through the lens of the events of war? That this question cannot be easily answered reveals the ultimate strength of the book, telling a complex tale of both individual lives and social values disrupted and re-shaped both by the events of war and by growing-up.

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